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8-12-2012

### Sex in Rotrou's Theater: Performance and Disorder

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#### Repository Citation

Ekstein, N. (2012). Sex in Rotrou's theater: Performance and disorder. *Orbis Litterarum*, 674, 290-309.  
doi:10.1111/j.1600-0730.2012.01053.x

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## Sex in Rotrou's Theater: Performance and Disorder

Desire is ubiquitous in seventeenth-century French theater, but the physical manifestation of desire on stage is another matter entirely. All theater must confront the issue of what to show on stage, and subjects such as sex are both titillating to the audience and fraught with social, religious, and ideological stakes. Institutions of authority inevitably view sexuality as 'disordering' (Zanger 4), all the more so in conjunction with the theater, which the seventeenth-century Church perceived as pernicious.<sup>1</sup> In their shared appeal to the passions, both sexuality and theater undermine external structures of control. During the period that we will focus on here—essentially the 'baroque' or 'pre-classical' 1630s—various acts of a sexual nature were common on stage.<sup>2</sup>

Whether as a function of baroque instability, dramatic freedom and experimentation, or, according to Butler 'une réaction vitale élémentaire contre l'obsession de la mort' typical of the baroque (1959, 31), sexual desire manifested itself explicitly, albeit not actually obscenely, on stage. The decade of the 1630s also saw enormous activity in the realm of dramatic theory, leading to the codification of rules that would banish all physical acts of a sexual nature from the stage.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the theater of the period had a larger socio-political role, working, as Menke notes, 'to fabricate the portrait of the absolute monarch and subjugate his followers' (1995, 88). Thus the powers that be all had an interest in eliminating the representation of sexuality onstage. Their success is evident in that sexual activity remained largely absent from the French stage after 1640 for many years, well beyond the seventeenth century.

I propose to consider how sex was represented during this brief period of relative theatrical permissiveness, specifically in the theater of Jean Rotrou (1609-1650) before 1640. Rotrou, the author of thirty-five existent plays, was incontestably a major force in seventeenth-century theater during the pre-classical period. His depiction of sexuality would seem to be rather typical of his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> Although he continued to write until his death, and while exact dating of

his plays is often difficult (see Gethner, 'Chronologie' 30), it is clear that by 1640 sex had largely disappeared from his stage as it had from that of his contemporaries.<sup>5</sup> Certainly Rotrou does not go as far in explicit sexuality as the earlier playwright Alexandre Hardy (1570-1632). In the latter's *Scédase*, for instance, two virgins are brutally raped on stage. Nonetheless, in Rotrou's plays, as in Hardy's, 'les amoureux . . . ont un corps' (Mazouer 87). Kisses, beds occupied onstage, and breasts (kissed, caressed, or described) are commonplace. The presence of sexuality in Rotrou's plays has been often noted, but there has been no analysis of its theatrical role.<sup>6</sup> What I propose in this study is a theatrical reading of sex in Rotrou's œuvre, a tripartite examination of dramatic strategy: how Rotrou foregrounds the scandalous nature of sexuality, how at other moments he moves to attenuate its prurient force, and finally how he proceeds to do both simultaneously through the theatrical performance of sexual activities. In this third part, in particular, sexuality becomes pure theater.

There are significant references to sexuality and/or sexual activity in the vast majority of Rotrou's plays. By and large sexuality is readily associated with love in his dramatic universe and conventional morality is not often a primary concern. Four of his plays contain unmarried women who are pregnant (*La Pèlerine amoureuse* [1631-1632], *Agésilan de Colchos* [1636], *La Belle Alphrède* [1636], *Les Deux Pucelles* [1637]), but only in the last of these four plays is any social stigma attached to the woman's condition. In *Cléagénor et Doristée* (1634), the female eponymous character, disguised as a man, does at one point launch into a moralizing disquisition, railing against the sexual interest shown 'him' by the servant Diane. Doristée/Philémond calls Diane 'impudique' (l.1091), and her ardor 'lubrique' (l.1092) and "criminelle" (l.1095). It may be exasperation rather than moral rectitude that motivates the diatribe however, as "he" has also been propositioned by both Diane's mistress and the latter's husband! As this last example suggests, adultery is a common feature of the sexuality on display. *Hercule mourant* (1630-1631) and *Les Sosies* (1637), with significant characters taken from mythology, both present adultery as a central feature of their respective plots; elsewhere

Félistmond marries onstage but then explicitly sleeps with his mistress (*L'Innocente Infidélité* [1631-1632]), and the possibility of adultery is actively entertained in *Les Ménechmes* (1630-1631) and the later *Bélisaire* (1643).

A certain number of unambiguous sexual acts are presented onstage in Rotrou's theater. Kisses are not uncommon; considerably more daring are the two instances of a kiss on the breast (*Filandre* [1631-32] V,6 and *Céliane* [1630-31] II,2) and the two onstage scenes of attempted rape (*L'Hypocondriaque* [1628] II,2; *Cléagénor et Doristée* 1,3). The presence of attempted rape is indicative of the fact that sex is at times closely tied to violence in this theater.<sup>7</sup> Indeed sex and violence encounter some of the same problems of representation and are both the object of the developing *bienséances*. For René Girard, they are inextricably linked: 'Le glissement de la violence à la sexualité, et de la sexualité à la violence s'effectue très aisément, dans un sens comme dans l'autre' (1972, 58). Rape, of course, is the classic form that the fusion of sex and violence takes. In Rotrou's theater we find one actual rape that transpires offstage in *Crisante* (1631-1632); three cases of threatened rape (of Marcie in *Crisante*, offstage; and as noted above, of Cléonice in *L'Hypocondriaque* and of Doristée in *Cléagénor et Doristée* on stage). Wolfgang Leiner may go too far when he asserts that 'Les scènes de viol sont nombreuses dans le théâtre de Rotrou' (1959, 188), but one does have the impression that a fair number of the playwright's male characters are potential rapists. For example, in *Laure persécutée* (1637), the king admits to a friend, after a young woman solicits his assistance in taking revenge against a Turk whom she says abducted and raped her: '[...] puis-je avecque justice / Punir un criminel dont je deviens complice, / Moi qui sens que mon coeur incline à son forfait, / Qui commet de désir ce qu'il commet d'effet?' (II.694-697).

A concrete onstage referent for sex is the bed. Five of Rotrou's plays make explicit reference to the presence of a bed on the stage (*L'Hypocondriaque*, *Céliane*, *L'Heureux Naufrage* [1631-1632], *Crisante*, and *Les Deux Pucelles*), and its possible appearance onstage is suggested in act 5, scene 1 of *L'Innocente Infidélité* during which Félistmond and Hermante dress after having

sex.<sup>8</sup> Of course beds do not refer only to sex, but Rotrou often incorporates a sexual suggestion along with the furniture's ostensible use. In *Céliane* Pamphile visits Nise as she recovers in bed from her wound, but when he climbs in bed with her the action becomes decidedly sexual (II,2). *L'Heureux Naufrage* opens with a bed onstage in which Cléandre is recovering from his shipwreck. While the bed's precise effect is unclear, the visits by the Queen and her sister to their recumbent guest lead them both in short order to fall madly in love with him. In *Les Deux Pucelles* most of act 2 takes place in a hotel room where, among other surprising activities, the innkeeper's wife, "*demi-nue*" enters the room and gazes with desire at the two sleeping figures, both of whom she believes to be men (II,6). Finally in *Crisante*, after rejecting the possibility of his wife's innocence in her rape and watching her commit suicide before his eyes, Antioch goes to his bed in despair and closes the curtains. A few instants later he reappears, having stabbed himself, and falls on his wife's body in order to join her in death. In so doing, Antioch symbolically mingles violence and sex in a curious echo of the sex and violence in Cassie's rape of Crisante earlier in the play. The bed in this scene may be considered a mere artifice employed to avoid a second onstage suicide; nonetheless it too functions as a fusion of sex (their marriage bed) and violence (Antioch stabs himself).

Rotrou uses offstage sexual acts sparingly. Most central to their respective plots are Jupiter's activities offstage with Alcmène (*Les Sosies*) and Cassie's rape of Crisante. The rather comic dénouement of *Les Occasions perdues* (1629) involves two women, both in love with Clorimond, mistakenly taking the wrong man to their beds off stage. Sex acts that belong to the pre-dramatic past are even rarer: we find only a brief reference to youthful sexual indiscretions by the parents of one of the female characters in Rotrou's first play, *L'Hypocondriaque* (IV,4). Of course the four extra-marital pregnancies can be said to reference pre-dramatic sex as well.

The farther we move from the direct representation of sexual acts on the stage, the more we encounter Rotrou's creative genius at incorporating, attenuating, and yet calling attention to the persistently "disordering" force of sexuality. Indeed, Rotrou often avoids direct sexual activity,

preferring instead that it be implied, promised, or suggested. One manner in which the playwright brings sexuality to the fore is through expressions of inappropriate desire. Kings often exploit their power by attempting the seduction of a young woman, as in *La Bague de l'oubli* (1629), *L'Innocente Infidélité*, *L'Heureuse Constance* (1629), and *Laure persécutée*. The danger facing the young woman is stressed in the last two examples; in both cases only a hasty marriage to someone else will deter the king.<sup>9</sup> Inappropriately directed desire, once it has left the domain of power relationships, is typically frustrated in Rotrou's theater. The innkeeper's wife is attracted to both Théodose (in male dress) and Alexandre, but in the end, she decides against adultery and makes no advances (*Les Deux Pucelles*). In *Les Ménechmes*, Ménechme ravi has no such scruples in his active pursuit of the aptly named Érotie. Unfortunately for him, the young woman is happy to take his gifts but firmly refuses his sexual advances. Furthermore Ménechme ravi is reproached by his father-in-law not merely for his inappropriate desire, but for his lack of *appropriate* desire for his daughter, Ménechme ravi's wife. Incest is obviously even more inappropriate than adultery. On three occasions, Rotrou makes reference to this possibility, but it is never developed: in *L'Heureuse Constance*, the king's nobleman (and in this scene, procurer) Timandre does not recognize his sister in her peasant costume and expresses his own attraction to her along with the king's (I,3); in *Antigone* (1637), Argie describes her husband's relationship with his sister Antigone in terms that suggest perhaps something more than a fraternal bond.<sup>10</sup> Homosexual desire is not absent from Rotrou's theater, but it is typically coupled with cross-dressing and thus carefully recuperated by the appearance of heterosexuality. I will deal with the issue later when I discuss theatrical performance of sexual activities.

Sexuality is often conveyed through language as opposed to onstage acts. The words themselves are seldom vulgar, but not infrequently highly suggestive. Acaste in *La Belle Alphrède* cedes Isabelle to his rival Rodolphe by saying: 'N'ayant eu que les fleurs, je vous laisse le fruit; / J'ai célébré le jour, célébrez-en la nuit' (II.1787-1788). A conversation between Théodose and Léocadie about the former's relationship with Antoine in *Les Deux Pucelles*

swings wildly from Léocadie's coarse question, 'que lui permîtes-vous? / Vous a-t-il possédée en qualité d'époux?' (ll.1086-1087) to Théodose's delicate response, 'L'Amour (ainsi qu'au sein je portois son flambeau) / Voulut que sur les yeux j'eusse aussi son bandeau' (ll.1114-1115).

Reference to sexual activity is fairly common and ranges from the unambiguous ('Vous, possédez bientôt la reine, / Caressons à l'envi ces objets de nos vœux' [*L'Heureuse Constance*" ll.1225-1226] and discussion of female breasts in *Céliane* [ll.310-311] and *L'Hypocondriaque* [ll.390-400]) to the more poetic ('de la glace qu'elle est, elle vient tout de flamme' [*Iphigénie* l.712]).

Rotrou's theater offers a number of unambiguous examples of sexual situations. Indeed, Scherer notes that the seventeenth-century public was more offended by sexually explicit language than by sexual situations (1956, 386). After kissing onstage, *Céliane* suggests to Florimant that they go into the woods, which they do (*Céliane* II,1). What ensues is left to our imagination. *Les Occasions perdues* not only presents the highly risqué situation of a double assignation (both Isabelle and the queen invite Clorimond to their bed for the same night), but in both cases the women mistakenly sleep with another man. As a function of this credulity-stretching mix-up, the title is transformed from a neutral enigma (what opportunities?) to a sexually loaded term (Clorimand: 'Pareille occasion dans le palais m'amène: / Une dame a promis de soulager ma peine,' ll.1643-1644).<sup>11</sup> The title *Les Deux Pucelles* takes on an equally sexual cast when we discover that it refers to two young women, one eager to lose her virginity and the other already pregnant.<sup>12</sup> In *Laure persécutée*, Rotrou undertakes a more subtle move to introduce sexuality: the fictional narrative of rape told by Laure in disguise. It is noteworthy that the chaste Laure chooses to make her doppelganger a non-virgin not protected by any man. The king is indeed attracted to her and the count suggests in a most vulgar fashion that the earlier attack makes her an easier target: 'Quelque difficulté qu'à l'abord elle fasse, / La brèche déjà faite assure de la place' (ll.718-719). Laure's own sexuality is thus deflected onto a fictional identity, one that operates in two opposing fashions, however. First, the scene implies it is not

Laure who is sexually active, but the fictional Éliante. However, it also associates sexual activity with Laure through visual association. This connection works to keep the king's accusations against Laure at least marginally credible as well as adding a note of titillation to the virtuous heroine.

Probably the most astonishingly sexual situation occurs in *L'Innocente Infidélité*. Sex is a prime consideration in the play, as the king's sexual desire is manipulated by his mistress Hermante and the magic ring she employs. Frustrated desire leads straight to criminality: the king Félismond agrees to murder his wife in order to obtain Hermante's sexual favors. Furthermore, the former suitor Clorimond opts for assault and rape once he loses his beloved Parthénie to marriage to the king. Hermante is the most egregious criminal of them all: she employs black magic and the powers of the underworld, as well as her sexual attractiveness, in order to satisfy her ambition to be queen. Gethner notes that the multiple allusions to mythology in this play focus solely on the sexual licentiousness of the gods (1985, xviii). But most startling in *L'Innocente Infidélité* is act 5, scene 1. In this explicitly post-coital scene, which finds the king and Hermante at their *toilette* after a night of love-making, both describe their pleasure in hyperbolic terms. Lancaster notes the exceptionally sexual nature of certain scenes in *L'Innocente Infidélité*, noting that they 'are rendered passionate to a degree that is not found in any other tragi-comedies of the time' (1966, II,74).<sup>13</sup>

Sexuality extends as well to the realm of the imagination. Cléagénor, searching for the missing Doristée, fears that she may be the victim of sexual violence: 'Peut-être qu'à présent sous l'extrême licence / Son honneur succombant n'attend que ma défense: / Peut-être que ce soir ce trésor de vertu, / Sous un brutal effort doit languir abattu' (*Cléagénor et Doristée*, II.553-556). He has thus conjured up an imaginary scene of rape. Later in the same play, Dorante, a woman who is very attracted to Doristée disguised in male attire, has a highly sexual dream that is clearly about this young "man" whom her husband has rescued. In it she imagines that her husband has come home from the hunt with a beautiful unicorn that he gives to her as a present.



She is very taken with the animal, but when her husband sees her kissing it, he reacts strongly: ‘Lascive, me dit-il, impudique, effrontée, / J’ai ta brutale ardeur trop longtemps supportée’ (ll.611-612). He too, however, is enamored of the unicorn and kisses it as well. The parallels between the dream and the action of the play are obvious.<sup>14</sup>

Dreams of sex, sexual situations, highly suggestive language, and even certain acts of a sexual nature that we find represented or alluded to in Rotrou’s theater are not out of line with pre-classical norms. Where Rotrou demonstrates striking originality is in his predilection for presenting sexuality as a theatrical performance. Using disguise, and in particular cross-dressing, Rotrou creates a breach between the characters and the sexual activity in which they engage, just as there exists a similar gap between all actors and the theatrical characters they embody. The characters engaging in sexual activities are playing a role. Distancing is not the only result however; indeed these scenes operate as disordering and at times reordering forces in the plays in which they appear.

By turning sexual activity into a performance rather than a simple function of desire, Rotrou is able to attenuate its scandalous nature. Sex in such cases becomes a theatrical illusion.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, Rotrou brings sex on stage, in the flesh, as it were. But the flesh is most often hidden behind the garb of the opposite sex. Cross-dressing is first and foremost a performance: characters abandon their own identity and act the role of the Other. Discussing the popularity of cross-dressing on the seventeenth-century stage, Scherer finds that such incidents are pleasing to audiences “précisément parce qu’ils choquent les bienséances” (1956, 400).<sup>16</sup> Eight characters in seven of Rotrou’s plays dress and pass themselves off as members of the opposite sex. Given the gender politics of the day, it is not surprising that all but one are women dressed as men.<sup>17</sup> Probably most startling are the two pregnant women — Alphrède in *La Belle Alphrède* and Théodose in *Les Deux Pucelles* — in male attire.

Not all cases of cross-dressing involve sexual performance, but most do. In *Cléagénor et Doristée*, the latter, passing herself off as a young man named Philémond, chooses to take on the

role of a male sexual predator in his/her dealings with the mistress's confidante Diane. While Philémond makes no physical moves, 'his' language could hardly be more explicit. 'He' tells Diane that he seeks sex without marriage: 'Et la fleur que j'espère [her virginity] et que tu me destines, / Me désagréerait fort avecques tant d'épines [marriage]' (ll.1046-47). 'He' prefers 'un beau péché' to 'une austère vertu' (l.1046). Philémond serves up a good deal of classic male sexual sophistry, but the very directness of 'his' discourse as 'he' pushes Diane to take responsibility for her own desire ensures that the young woman will flee. A similar scene occurs between Philémond et Diane's mistress Dorante, but 'he' plays a different role when faced with Dorante's sexual interest: here Philémond is chaste and respectful before the increasingly clear insinuations of Diane ('Je t'offre pour emploi des baisers tout de flamme,' l.1203). Her husband Théandre bursts on stage from his hiding place where he witnessed the scene as a secret spectator. While his anger at his wife may be genuine, he is in fact an actor as well, because he knows that Philémond is really Doristée. Thus when he suggests a threesome ('Page, occupe mon lit, viens ce soir en ses bras, / Et seconde un mari qui ne lui suffit pas,' ll.1257-1258), the audience can be titillated while safe in the knowledge that he does not mean what he says. Or perhaps not exactly what he says: he may indeed have in mind that very threesome, but it would involve one man and two women.

Internal performances of all sorts are a fairly common feature of Rotrou's theater, typically referred to as *passe-temps*.<sup>18</sup> In three plays, however, we find carefully prepared, specifically sexual performances that involve cross-dressing, enacted for an unwitting audience. All three foreground the sexual while simultaneously shielding it behind the theatrical status of the acts performed as well as the gender status of one of the participants. In act 5, scene 2 of *Amélie*, Dionys hides on stage in order to be able to eavesdrop on the conversation between his beloved Amélie and a young man (really a cross-dressed woman named Cloris). The latter declares 'his' love in hyperbolic terms. Amélie demurs modestly, telling 'him' that she is already promised to another and that while she finds 'him' very attractive, infidelity is the worst crime imaginable.

Cloris retreats before Amélie's virtue, saying 'he' is not even worthy to die for her, at which point Amélie abruptly, and rather comically, changes direction and says, 'Je me rends, je suis prise' (l.1509); 'Je vais fermer l'oreille aux vœux de Dionys' (l.1511). Upon which they begin to kiss passionately on stage. The performance continues as Dionys bursts in, accusing Amélie of the worst perfidy. She and Cloris deny everything, rather implausibly, and it is only in the next scene that Dionys learns that Cloris is a woman and that what he witnessed was a performance.

In *Célimène*, both the eponymous heroine and her sister Félicie have fallen in love with the cross-dressed Florante. When Célimène learns of her error, she decides to stage a sexual performance for her sister, in which Célimène will collude in victimizing the latter rather than dwell on her own victimization. With virtually all of the characters onstage, she informs her sister that Floridan (the name Florante takes as a man) is smitten with her (Félicie) and that "cette même nuit il couche avecque vous" (l.1604). Nonplussed, Félicie tells her sister, 'Ce qui vous sera bon, ne l'offrez point à d'autres' (l.1605), at which point Célimène turns to Floridan and says 'Je suis à vous, Monsieur, et vous offre ma couche' (l.1614). Before the horrified Félicie, Florante/Floridan takes the game a step further: 'pour vos deux beautés mon ardeur est pareille. / Vous devez toutes deux accorder à mes maux / De pareilles faveurs, et des plaisirs égaux' (ll.1618-1620). The performance ends when Florante/Floridan exposes her breast, thereby ending her role as a male.

The third example is the most complex and it reminds us that all cross-dressing, once it takes on a sexual component, opens the door to the possibility of homosexuality. The word "homosexuality" is, of course, a nineteenth-century formulation, but the reality of what it designates as well as the taboos surrounding such sexual attraction existed in seventeenth-century France. *Célimène* provides a four-part staging of sexual activity, the first, third, and fourth of which are for the benefit of different onstage audiences. Hoping to drive Florimant away from Nise (so that Nise may be returned to her original beloved Pamphile, who ceded her to Florimant out of devoted friendship), Julie suggests to Florimant that Nise may not be as pure as

she seems and alludes to rumors concerning a ‘vil paysan’ (l.1375). Céliane, Florimant’s earlier love interest, disguises herself as a male gardener; she and Nise prepare a performance for Florimant ‘*dans une chambre fermée*’ (V,3). The question of staging is interesting: Florimant cannot see Nise or the disguised Céliane, but the spectator clearly can, as we know because the following scenes take place within the room. Despite Julie’s assurances in act 5, scene 2—‘Vous croirez ce discours si votre œil l’autorise’ (l.1376)—Florimant is presented as ‘*écoutant à la porte*’ (V,4) and there are no references to sight. Thus Florimant and Julie listen blindly at the door as Nise and Céliane play their roles: Nise insists that her marriage to Florimant will simply be a pretense that ‘ne servira qu’à couvrir nos plaisirs’ (l.1413). The young woman disguised as a gardener moves the performance into the realm of explicit sexuality: ‘Ma bouche maintenant veut d’autres exercices, / Sa violente ardeur ne se peut contenir; / Je sais mieux vous baiser que vous entretenir’ (ll.1420-1422). Their kisses have the desired effect on Florimant: he runs off in complete disgust to return Nise to Pamphile. Noteworthy is the fact that Nise and Céliane, in planning for this performance, spoke only of language: ‘Il faut qu’en nos discours notre amour soit dépeinte’ (l.1384). It is Céliane, playing the role of the male, who moves their theatrical performance from sexual language to acts, acts visible to the extra-scenic audience. Furthermore, it is ironic that this scandalous scene in fact enacts the embrace of the two women between whom Florimant wavers.

What happens next suggests that Céliane may well have taken her role to heart. The second performance, while theatrical in nature, is problematically flawed due to the absence of an audience, or even a clear purpose. Once Florimant leaves, Julie rushes into the theatrical space of the room in order to congratulate the two actresses. Sincerely or not (we have no way of knowing), Julie tells Céliane that she has been aroused by the latter’s performance: ‘je brûle d’amour de t’avoir entendue’ (l.1448). Clearly staying in the role of the gardener, Céliane begins to kiss Julie. Nise reacts with obviously feigned jealousy (ll.1451-56) and Céliane suggests that one of them should be ‘his’ wife and the other ‘his’ mistress. While suggesting

certain analogies with the overall plot of the play (*change*, sudden attractions), the scene is essentially gratuitous. It is above all a ludic moment in which the three women play at sex and gender roles. Whether there is a genuine sexual attraction between any of them is an open question.

The third theatrical performance in *Célie* takes place between the same characters and in the same room as the first. This time it is Julie and Philidor (who loves Célie in vain but is loved by Julie) who are the spectators. Philidor, unlike Florimant, watches Célie and Nise from within the room itself ('*Julie, le [Philidor] menant dans sa chambre*' V,5). Célie's intended audience—Philidor—is aware, however, that the gardener is Célie simply dressed as a man. He knows that she is playing the role of a heterosexual male attempting to win Nise's love and sexual favors. Philidor thus witnesses this theatrical performance as a spectator conscious that he is watching a performance. But his consciousness is limited to gender; he does not question the reality of Célie's desire nor Nise's response to it. Indeed, he is appalled by Célie's seemingly homosexual behavior, calling her 'insensée' (l.1519). Thus, one aspect of performance—cross-dressing—is perceived as independent of the language and acts committed within that theatrical context. Nise staunchly resists the cross-dressed Célie's entreaties and then suddenly, and for no apparent reason, capitulates (much like Amélie, above): 'Baisez-moi, j'y consens' (l.1544). We may assume that Célie does so, because Philidor interjects, 'je plains sa folie' (l.1547). The goals of this theatrical performance are attained: Philidor turns his attentions from Célie back to Julie and the scene ends, significantly, with heterosexual kissing onstage.

The final scene of this performance (V,8) is an expanded reenactment of the first, with the addition of a second listener at the door: Pamphile joins Florimant in what they believe to be eavesdropping as the 'gardener' and Nise express their love. When the latter two abandon words for what must be audible kisses, Florimant bangs on the door and soon is able to see into the room ('*Florimant, les voyant au travers de la porte*'). He verbally abuses and rejects Nise, and

then pulls the ‘gardener’ out of his hiding place in order to assault him. It is only when Florimant is about to attack the ‘gardener’ with a knife that he realizes it is Céliane in disguise.<sup>19</sup>

Inexplicably, albeit inevitably, this scene leads quickly to universal reconciliation. Any lingering concerns about homosexuality are papered over by Julie’s explanation that Céliane ‘a ... recouvré la raison’ (l.1797) because Florimant has gone back to her.<sup>20</sup> The classically comic dénouement of three marriages stands in stark contrast to the three soon-to-be-brides’ homosexual play (in both senses of the word) in these scenes.

The suggestion of homosexuality is frequent in cases of cross-dressing, and insofar as it is never fully accepted (the second performance in *Céliane*, above, comes closest), it is typically associated with ludic, theatrical activity. For example, we find several allusions to a potential lover’s inadequacy, a kind of inside joke dependent upon the knowledge that the lover in question is really a woman. Florante/Floridan says ‘Je leur [Célimène and Félicie] promets beaucoup, et ne puis donner rien’ (*Célimène*, l.1251); Doristée/Philémond tells Dorante that ‘he’ has neither ‘partie, esprit, ni qualités / Dignes de leur [women’s] amour ni de leurs privautés’ and ‘he’ assures Diane that ‘le mal que tu crains [pregnancy] ne te peut advenir’ (*Cléagénor et Doristée*, (ll.1160-1162 and 1073) (see Harris 160–161). It is precisely in these two plays, both of which contain an elevated level of sexual desire occasioned by the cross-dressed woman, that events are brought back to reality by the onstage exhibition of the breast, proof positive of gender.

Guichemerre refers to the potential homosexuality in these ambiguous situations involving cross-dressing as ‘un érotisme équivoque’ (1993, 294) and elsewhere discusses in reference to Rotrou’s theater ‘une certaine sensualité érotique, voire un goût pour des jeux ambigus, expression de sentiments assez troubles, entre personnes du même sexe’ (1981, 169). Kissing onstage is the most frequent vehicle for such ambiguity. Whereas in *Amélie* (V,2) and *Céliane* (V,4) apparently heterosexual embraces cover homosexuality, albeit theatrical, the opposite occurs elsewhere. In *L’Heureux Naufrage* we witness what seems to be two men kissing but is in

fact a man and a woman (III,6). Similarly, what appears to be one woman kissing another who is asleep is really a cross-dressed man (Agésilan) taking advantage of the situation in which he finds his beloved (*Agésilan de Colchos* III,2). The threatening possibility of homosexuality in these last two cases is attenuated by the spectator's knowledge of the characters' true gender.

Not surprisingly, given that it is far more typical for a woman to disguise herself as a man in this *oeuvre* than vice-versa, most suggestions of homosexual desire involve women, rather than men. Two women who desire each other are less scandalous for seventeenth-century audiences than two men, and thus can be tolerated.<sup>21</sup> In *Amélie*, as the two women plan the theatrical performance described above, the eponymous heroine notes that the fact that Cloris appears to be a man 'rendra nos libertés licites' (I.1234). In *Les Deux Pucelles*, act 4, scene 9, Léocadie and Théodose are alone together onstage, both dressed as men, both aware that the other is a woman and a rival. Théodose praises Léocadie's beauty, declaring 'au point où je suis je doute justement / Qui j'aime plus des deux, la rivale ou l'amant' (II.1554-1555). In *Agésilan*, the situation is inverted because the male (Agésilan) is dressed as a female so that heterosexuality is hidden under the appearance of homosexuality. Diane, unaware that Agésilan is a male, seems ready to accept that homosexuality, although she wonders, 'Mais quel serait le fruit de cette passion?' (I.690). Her friend Ardénie defends such a relationship by answering, 'le plaisir d'aimer la beauté dans l'extrême / Qu'elle ne peut trouver que dans son sexe même' (II.692-693). Once again, however, homosexual ambiguity is recuperated into heterosexual normalcy, in this example by the audience's awareness of Agésilan's cross-dressing.

Despite the higher level of scandal associated with male homosexuality, ambiguous suggestions of inter-male desire are not absent from Rotrou's theater. *Célimène* contains two curiously dissimilar examples, both tied to the dénouement where Florante/Floridan must renegotiate the gender line. When Célimène attacks Floridan (still thought to be a man) for turning her over to another suitor Alidor, 'he' defends himself by saying that she is mistaken, that Filandre, the young man whose own infidelity led Florante to assume a male disguise,

‘répondra de ma fidélité. / Il est l’unique objet de l’ardeur qui m’enflamme, / Il possède tout seul et mon coeur et mon âme’ (ll.1484-1486). The suggestion that one man might love another is perfectly incomprehensible to Célimène. ‘A-t-il perdu le sens?’ (l.1489), she asks, and then in her inability to process inter-male love, she almost stumbles upon the truth: ‘Dieux! qu’il est insensé, croit-il être une femme?’ (l.1493). In the dénouement of the same play, the rapid succession of revelations hides another homosexual note. Filandre returns to Florante essentially because of the mechanism of triangulation of desire: she becomes more attractive to him because both Célimène (whom Filandre had preferred to Florante) and her sister Félicie find Floridan/Florante to be irresistible. In essence, Filandre returns to Florante because she is such a desirable man!<sup>22</sup> Needless to say, the play does not directly address the matter. In act 4, scene 3 of *Cléagénor et Doristée*, Philémond/Doristée shocks Dorante much as Floridan/Florante shocks Célimène with an expression of amorous affection for another male. ‘He’ explains that ‘he’ understands Dorante’s feelings, because ‘he’ once felt the same towards un objet adorable, / Un homme si parfait et si considérable (ll.1147-1148). Dorante does her best to paper over the implicit homosexuality by crediting the young man’s innocence and naïveté. Doristée/Philémond continues to play with ‘his’ interlocutor, feigning an ignorance that favors sexual ambiguity: ‘Aucune fille encor n’a mon âme asservie / Aucune n’a troublé le repos de ma vie’ (ll.1155-1156). Cross-dressing thus favors the confusion of sexual orientation, thereby introducing a principle of disorder that builds upon and amplifies the centrally disordering force of sexual desire.

Sexual activity and the disorder it occasions are widely present in Rotrou’s theater before 1640. The character Doristée of *Cléagénor et Doristée* is emblematic of the playwright’s exuberance in fomenting the disordering force of the sexual. Without doing anything particular to elicit the attention of those around her, she becomes the universal object of desire. Cléagénor wants to marry her; Méandre abducts her; Ozanor steals her from Méandre and tries to have his way with her on stage; Théandre, Cléagénor’s friend, wants her as well and kisses her onstage



under the pretense that ‘he’ (he knows it is she) resembles a former girlfriend; and Théandre’s wife Dorante and her servant Diane each throw themselves at Doristée while she is disguised as a man. Almost no one in the play is exempt from the sexually disordering principle that she embodies. But even in *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (1645), a play that is as distant from *Cléagénor et Doristée* as possible and well outside the dates set out above for onstage depiction of sex, sexuality creates disorder. Genest’s theatrical performance of Adrien’s martyrdom is interrupted by a rowdy group in the wings. They are the young men attracted by the actresses in Genest’s troupe: ‘De vos dames la jeune et courtoise beauté / Vous attire toujours cette importunité’ (ll.1029-030). Ce désordre extrême (l.1027) is dealt with by the emperor Dioclétien who takes pains to articulate his precise role in such matters: ‘Il faut y donner ordre, et l’y porter nous-même’ (l.1028). In so doing, Dioclétien suggests a parallel between the disorder caused by sexuality and that caused by Christianity. The emperor imposes order in the religious domain by torturing and executing Genest who converted while acting the role of the Christian martyr Adrian. Thus Rotrou allows Christianity and sexuality to occupy, albeit briefly, the same functional space as agents of disorder, a disquieting note in a complex play. In the final analysis, what stands out, once we look under the protective cover of theatrical performance and cross-dressing, as well as that of indirection and innuendo, is the pervasive power of sexuality in Rotrou’s theater.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Thirouin for a thorough discussion of the Church's attitude toward the theater in seventeenth-century France.

<sup>2</sup> See Truchet (43); Scherer (399, 403–04). It is curious that Bougard, in his *Érotisme et amour physique dans la littérature française du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, makes no mention of any theatrical work.

<sup>3</sup> See Truchet (42–43), Guichemerre (288), and Scherer (399–400).

<sup>4</sup> Gethner quotes Viollet-le-Duc's comments on sexuality in Rotrou's theater: a number of scenes offrent des situations fort libres, et qui prouvent la licence du théâtre à cette époque, car on ne reprocha jamais à Rotrou d'avoir outragé la pudeur plus qu'aucun de ses contemporains (1985, v). It is worth noting that female roles in seventeenth-century France were typically played by women (except when the role called for an old woman). Indeed, Bellerose's troupe, the 'Comédiens du roi', for which Rotrou composed his plays throughout this period, included female members, according to Gethner (2004, 15).

<sup>5</sup> See Guichemerre, 1993, 294. According to Deierkauf-Holsboer's dating, Rotrou wrote only nine of his plays after the 1630s. I will rely on her dating here.

<sup>6</sup> Guichemerre's work on the subject of sexuality provides thorough description but limits conclusions to its eventual disappearance from Rotrou's stage (1993). Others make brief reference to the subject (Vuillemin 237–38, Mazouer [2006] 527, Scherer [1975] 1298, and Morel 52) or discuss sex in relation to love and the *bienséances* (Leiner 188–93).

<sup>7</sup> David Clarke asserts that "French tragedy in the first quarter of the century is notorious [not] for its atrocity but, for sexual violence" (1996, 103).

<sup>8</sup> Stage directions: (*La chambre s'ouvre.*) FÉLISMOND, *s'habillant avec des valets d'Hermante, et elle se coiffant à son miroir.*

<sup>9</sup> Timandre tells his sister Rosélie: 'Ce remède, ma soeur, est le seul que je voi / Dont on puisse arrêter les passions du roi' (*L'Heureuse Constance* ll.260-261).

<sup>10</sup> Ni repos, ni pays, ni mère, ni couronne,  
Ne lui fut en objet, à l'égal d'Antigone;  
Jour ni nuit n'ont passé qu'il ne parlât de vous,  
Et non sans que mon cœur en fût un peu jaloux:  
Car, à voir quelle part, nous avions en son âme,  
Je paraissais sa sœur et vous sembliez sa femme (*Antigone* ll.997-1002)

The third example is from the later play *La Soeur* (1645): the multiple switches of identity lead the couple Lélie and Sophie to the possibility that they may be sister and brother.

<sup>11</sup> *L'Innocente Infidélité* is another title that is both ironic and charged with sexual suggestion. The only truly innocent character, Parthénie, is in no way unfaithful. Évandré, the king's henchman, could be said to be unfaithful to the king in not following his orders to murder Parthénie but also innocent in that his motives—to protect Parthénie—are pure, but it seems unlikely that Rotrou was referring to a secondary character when he named his play. The king Félismond is certainly unfaithful to his new wife (he is even unfaithful to his promise to his mistress Hermante to marry her), but while his infidelity is to some degree excused by Hermante's use of a magic ring to attract him, the term "innocent" seems hardly appropriate, all the more so because he orders Évandré to kill his wife. Furthermore the spectator will not necessarily share his definition of "innocent": Félismond refers to his sexual activities with Hermante before his marriage as "Ces innocents ébats" (l.861) and his desire for Hermante as "ces innocentes flammes" (l. 1409).

<sup>12</sup> The word 'pucelle' does not seem to allow for ambiguity, at least according to Furetière's definition: 'Fille qui a encore la fleur de virginité.'

<sup>13</sup> Félistmond complains that the night has ended far too quickly and Hermante enthuses: ‘Alcmène avec Jupin eut de moindres plaisirs / Et n’eut jamais d’ardeur égale à mes désirs’ (II.1191-1192).

<sup>14</sup> Pelckmanns studies the dozen dreams in Rotrou’s theater and notes that they are typically easy to interpret (1982, 140).

<sup>15</sup> I thus disagree with Vuillemin when he says, ‘dans le théâtre de Rotrou, si l’on se bat en duel parfois pour rire et si l’on tire souvent l’épée ou le poignard sans conséquence, l’on se bise et l’on se caresse toujours pour de bon’ (1994, 237).

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Jan Clarke suggests that such sexual ambiguity creates an air of titillation in these plays, particularly homoerotic titillation (2010, 222).

<sup>17</sup> Agésilan is the one male dressed as a woman (*Agésilan de Colchos*). The women who adopt a male identity are Florante in *Célimène* (1630-31), Doristée in *Cléagénor et Doristée*, Cloris in *Amélie* (1630-31), Théodose and Léocadie in *Les Deux Pucelles*, Alphrède in *La Belle Alphrède*, and Floronde in *L’Heureux Naufrage*.

<sup>18</sup> See Morel 200–201, Baby 76, Lyons 41, and Mazouer (2006) 552. Cashman calls them ‘performance-within-a-play,’ but does not discuss Rotrou in her book; Forestier calls them ‘jeux de rôle’ (1981, see esp. 347–50). Forestier and Cashman make an important distinction: what they refer to is not a play-within-a-play, which is explicitly presented as a theatrical performance situated on a different diegetic level from the main action. Rotrou employs such a play-with-a-play in *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (1645), but it involves no sexual performance.

<sup>19</sup> The close call with the knife mirrors the armed altercation between Pamphile and Nise (disguised as a man) at the beginning of the play (I,2).

<sup>20</sup> A more subtle move away from the dangerous territory of homosexuality is act 5, scene 7 which, like the end of scene 4, presents the three women alone together on stage. Where the earlier scene was filled with more or less playful expressions of their desire for one another, in scene 7 they are all business. Julie discusses strategy, Nise raises moral concerns, and Céliane reassures the others. Sexuality has disappeared.

<sup>21</sup> Harris explains the predominance of inter-female affection by the contiguity of female desire and friendship; male homosexuality “had none of the innocence of its female equivalent” with the result that it was a much more dangerous subject (2005, 176).

<sup>22</sup> Forestier notes that the name Filandre means ‘qui aime l’homme’ (1988, 247).

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